

EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 28 March 2025 commencing at 10.02 am and finishing at 1.00 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Nigel Simpson - in the Chair
Councillor Jenny Hannaby
Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE
Councillor Trish Elphinstone
Councillor Andy Graham
Councillor Damian Haywood
Councillor Roz Smith
Councillor Michael Waine

Co-opted Members Hana G
Katie N
Peace Nnaji

Other Members in Attendance: Cllr John Howson, Cabinet member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services

Officers: Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services
Jean Kelly, Deputy Director for Children's Social Care
Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director – County Services
Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion
Clare Pike, Acting Headteacher of Oxfordshire Virtual School
Barbara Chillman, Pupil Place Planning Manager
Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer
Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Manager

The Council considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda and reports, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

10/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS (Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Povolotsky, substituted by Cllr Haywood, and from Cllr Corkin.

The Chair thanked Cllrs Corkin and Povolotsky, neither of whom was standing for re-election, for their work on the Committee since it was established and on the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee before that. The Chair also thanked Cllr Waine, who was also not standing for re-election, for his years of service on this Committee and on earlier iterations of it.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services emphasised the importance of confidentiality, particularly regarding young people under 18, and proposed that the Council and committee adopt a principle to ensure no child is identified in public records. They suggested stopping the live stream if a speaker attempts to identify a child and reviewing past video streams to remove any such instances.

11/25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Agenda No. 2)

There were none.

12/25 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The minutes for the meeting held on 28th February 2025 were **APPROVED** as a true and accurate record.

13/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda No. 4)

There were none.

14/25 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS

(Agenda No. 5)

The Committee **NOTED** the Cabinet response of the Draft Education Other Than at School report.

15/25 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda No. 6)

The Committee **NOTED** the action and recommendation tracker.

16/25 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN

(Agenda No. 7)

The Committee **AGREED** to the work programme for the forthcoming meeting, confirming the proposed additional meeting on Friday, 13 June 2025.

The Committee also requested an item on Wood Eaton School, recognising that some aspects of the report would be likely to be considered in private.

17/25 UPDATE ON CHILDREN'S HOMES

(Agenda No. 8)

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services, attended to present the report. Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Jean Kelly, Deputy Director for Children's Social Care, and Charlotte Davey,

Assistant Director – County Services, also attended to answer the Committee's questions.

The Cabinet Member introduced the topic of children's homes, explaining the collaboration with the Department for Education (DfE) to increase the number of small, family-like children's homes in Oxfordshire. He highlighted the benefits of these homes in providing a more personal and supportive environment for children.

The Assistant Director provided an update on the development of new children's homes, detailing the progress of each home. Aspen House had opened recently, accommodating four children who were brought back into the county from out-of-county placements, and it had received a 'good' rating from Ofsted.

Peak House was ready to open, pending an initial Ofsted registration visit. Staff were in place and being utilised across other establishments until the home could officially open. Willow Bank was expected to open in autumn, following the model of Peak House.

Great Mead faced delays due to environmental concerns. Oat Hill required significant internal and external work, with planning permission and contractor issues causing delays.

The Assistant Director summarised the financial aspects, noting that the homes were coming in on budget, and any under-budget savings would be partially returned to the DfE.

Members asked about the current timeframe for getting children's homes registered, noting the complexity and lengthy process experienced in 2023. Officers advised that the process for getting children's homes registered had seen some improvements. In 2023, the timeframe was around 19 weeks from the point of having all necessary paperwork ready. By 2025, this timeframe had been reduced to approximately 12 weeks. However, it was acknowledged that the process could still take longer in some cases, due to the complexity of the registration process, including the requirement to have a registered manager and staff in place before applying for registration.

Members inquired about the number of children in unregistered placements and if Peak House could accommodate those needing Tier 4 beds for severe mental health issues or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The Assistant Director informed Members that the number of children in unregistered placements has dropped from a peak of 15 to fewer than five thanks to efforts to find suitable registered placements.

The Assistant Director also explained how Peak House was designed for children who require intensive support and cannot live with another child. The facility provided a safe environment for children with severe mental health issues or PTSD and worked closely with Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to ensure their needs were met.

Members inquired about private providers buying properties for children with disabilities, their registration process, and interaction with the Council. Officers

explained that these providers need registration through Ofsted or the CQC, and they seek planning permission from district councils.

Concerns were raised about using unregistered County beds for children. The Assistant Director stressed adherence to registration standards for ethical and legal reasons, ensuring high-quality care. The Council used only registered placements and kept Ofsted informed for transparency, while providing daily support from a multi-agency team to children in unregistered arrangements.

Members inquired about expanding the children's homes initiative and staff preparation for new openings. Officers stated the Council would review current developments before further expansion to ensure positive outcomes. The Council was also part of the Southeast Regional Care Cooperative programme to manage residential care over the next three years. For staff preparation, the Council had a recruitment campaign, with new staff undergoing inductions in existing homes. Registered managers were appointed and assisted in other homes as needed.

Members inquired about the number of children in various placements (out of county, in county, in private homes) and progress in working with neighbouring authorities for specialist care. The Assistant Director and the Deputy Director of Children's Services shared that the Council was caring for 777 children, including 80 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Of these, 66 were in privately run homes outside the county due to a lack of local specialist provisions. Oxfordshire had 99 beds in private settings, but the Council faced competition and high costs for these placements. Progress had been made through the Southeast Regional Care Cooperative programme to manage residential care collaboratively over the next three years, aiming to maximise capacity and ensure high-quality care in the region.

The cost differences between county-run homes and private sector care was discussed, with the Committee stressing that the priority should be children's well-being. The Assistant Director noted county homes cost around £4,500 per child per week, while private sector costs often exceeded £7,000, sometimes reaching £17,000 or £18,000. The Council stressed the focus should remain on providing quality care rather than solely financial considerations.

The Committee **AGREED** to a recommendation under the following heading:

- That the Council should encourage Ofsted to ensure the registration period for children's homes is as short as possible and thereby expedite the process of placing children in registered settings.

18/25 REPORT OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL

(Agenda No. 9)

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services, attended to present a report on the Virtual School and to provide an update to the Committee on the extended responsibilities laid on the Virtual School as well as ones that were anticipated to come into force under new legislation.

Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion, and Clare Pike, Acting Headteacher of Oxfordshire Virtual School, also attended to answer the Committee's questions.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services introduced the virtual school report and shared positive feedback from the February 2024 Ofsted inspection, praising the school's ambition and vision. Concerns about challenges faced by children in care were raised, particularly with in-year school admissions. The Cabinet Member voiced his support for the bill proposing local authorities handle in-year admissions.

The Acting Headteacher of Oxfordshire Virtual School presented the report, outlining work done between September 2023 and August 2024. She described the core duty of promoting education for children in care and care leavers, and extended duties for previously cared-for children, children with a social worker, and children in kinship care. Achievements included reducing school move times, improving educational outcomes, and increasing university attendance and graduation rates among care leavers.

Members asked about co-production in personal education plans (PEPs) for children in care and the awareness of school governors. The Acting Headteacher of Oxfordshire Virtual School described how PEPs were significantly co-produced, ensuring the young person's voice was included. Efforts were made to ensure governors knew the number of children in care in their schools and their educational progress. Training for governors was being reviewed, and they were encouraged to attend relevant sessions, addressing non-attendance with governance leaders.

Members interrogated suspension statistics in measuring school success, noting that some schools might favour internal exclusions or rest days for children instead of official exclusions. The Acting Headteacher of Oxfordshire Virtual School agreed that suspension statistics were not as detailed as they might be, and was aware of this issue and planned further inquiries into how schools might be masking other forms of exclusion. The Acting Headteacher emphasised the relational schools programme, which aimed to create trauma-informed, shame-sensitive, relational, and restorative environments to reduce suspensions and exclusions by fostering belonging and support for all students.

Members discussed the careful consideration required for children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) in their transition plans, including extended periods away from education to ensure effective transitions. The Acting Headteacher of Oxfordshire Virtual School emphasised the need for tailored support and involving young people in planning. The Council stressed the importance of collaborative efforts to address the child's needs during reintegration into school, noting thoughtful planning was vital for sustainable support.

The Committee sought assurance that there was sufficient capacity existed in the Admissions team to manage the increase in in-year admissions. The Acting Headteacher of Oxfordshire Virtual School believed the team was capable, noting that the workload depends on the number needing placements. Directing academies to take these children would simplify the process. The Council recognised some

academies' reluctance to delegate but hoped the government would uphold the bill changes for better management. Officers had not heard opposition from any Academy Trusts and anticipated compliance once the bill came into force.

The Committee **AGREED** to recommendations under the following headings:

- That the Council should continue to highlight the work of the virtual school with governing boards and social workers to ensure they are well-informed and engaged in supporting the education of children in care.
- That the Council, in subsequent annual reports of the Virtual School, should report in more detail on exclusions including informal internal processes.

Katie N left the meeting at this stage.

19/25 SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING AND DELIVERY (Agenda No. 10)

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services, attended to present the report on School Place Planning and Delivery. Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion, and Barbara Chillman, Pupil Place Planning Manager, also attended to answer the Committee's questions.

The Cabinet Member introduced the report on school place planning and delivery, highlighting the challenges posed by falling birth rates and the impact of significant house building in Oxfordshire. Concerns were expressed about the capital expenditure required for new schools and the potential risks to funding for school replacements. The Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion provided additional context, mentioning the recent allocation of high needs capital funding and the principles and criteria for allocating this funding to schools. The Pupil Place Planning Manager then detailed the sustainable school's strategy, explaining the flexible approach to new schools, the reduction of admission numbers, and the repurposing of surplus accommodation for SEND provision.

Members discussed the use of Section 106 funds for schools and emphasised the need to engage planning authorities for comprehensive service delivery, including primary healthcare. They advocated reviewing the formula and process to better integrate services. The Council noted that Section 106 contributions are legally bound by Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) regulations, which require the funds to be proportionate to development impacts and necessary for planning approval. This meant the funds could increase school places but not necessarily improve them. Collaboration with district councils at the local planning stage was crucial to identify infrastructure impacts and secure land and funding for schools and other services. The corporate property group was highlighted for its role in coordinating efforts and ensuring an inclusive planning process.

Members raised concerns about flexible school place planning due to declining intake numbers. The Pupil Place Planning Manager explained that the Council adopted a

flexible strategy to ensure sustainability and manage impacts on existing schools. Priorities included expanding existing schools, relocating them, and using split sites before considering new standalone schools. This sensitive approach to population changes mitigated risks to other schools.

The Council successfully implemented this strategy by relocating and expanding schools in Shrivenham, Farringdon, and Wallingford to improve site constraints and sustainability. Collaboration with Academy Trusts and stakeholders ensured cooperative planning aligned with community needs, facilitating creative solutions to address falling intake numbers.

Members sought clarification on the term "expansion" and expressed concerns about relying on temporary resources like portacabins. The Pupil Place Planning Manager explained that expansion generally meant permanent additions using permanent structures, avoiding temporary solutions unless absolutely necessary.

Single age group classes were preferred by many head teachers and leadership teams for easier management, but mixed-age classes in smaller rural schools had been very successful. Smaller mixed-age rural schools help alleviate strain on SEND and alternative provisions, offering a supportive environment for families with children with SEND. Decisions on class structures were made by the school's head teacher, chair of governors, and senior leadership based on their specific needs and circumstances.

Members explored how smaller class sizes might impact on effectiveness of efficient education. The Pupil Place Planning Manager and Deputy Director acknowledged the concern, stating that while one teacher's view might be subjective, generally classes below 25 could challenge financial viability. The funding formula based on pupil numbers influenced class sizes, aiming for high 20s with a maximum of 30 for reception and key stage one classes. The Council balanced effective teaching and financial viability, using evidence-based research to plan school places and support schools' unique needs. They aimed to place children in nearby schools to enhance educational experience and community integration, with transport costs considered but focusing mainly on quality and environmental impact.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing